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ABSTRACT

Telecommunications networks were placed in 16 rural high school library media centers in 12 southside Virginia counties. With these units, the high school media centers are able to access the online public access catalog at Longwood College, the Lancaster Library's VTLS (Virginia Tech Library System) database. If a needed book is found, a request is then made online. The books arrive in the mail several days later. A survey was conducted of the 16 library media specialists and the English teachers in each of the schools to determine if information access had made a measurable impact on the network high school library media centers. Results showed that online access to an academic card catalog and the resulting interlibrary loans did not: (1) stimulate circulation of the school library media centers' own materials; (2) increase the number of class research visits; or (3) increase the number of assignments English teachers made. Online access did appear to improve the variety of assignments English teachers can make, the attitude of English teachers toward the library media center, and ratings by English teachers of the adequacy of the library media centers' collections. Overall, networking has had a positive impact on school library media centers and the services which they can offer their patrons. Further surveys should target other subject area teachers and students. (KS)

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The Impact of Information Access

In

Southside Virginia High School Library Media Centers

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RC 018 377

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Information Power challenges us "to ensure equity and freedom of access to information and ideas, unimpeded by social, cultural, economic, geographic, or technologic constraints."[1] Networking is one avenue which can help us to meet this challenge! In the fall of 1984, library media specialists from twelve rural southside Virginia counties met at the Dabney S. Lancaster Library at Longwood College in Farmville, Virginia, and formed the Southside Virgina Library Network. One outgrowth of this networking activity has been the placing of a telecommunications unit (a microcomputer, printer, modem, and telecommunications software) in each of the sixteen high school library media centers in the twelve network member counties: Amelia, Appomattox, Buckingham, Campbell, Charlotte, Cumberland, Halifax/South Boston, Lunenburg, Mecklenburg, Nottoway, Powhatan, and Prince Edward.

Four school divisions, realizing early possible advantages of such networking, purchased the needed hardware and software on their own; high schools in the other eight counties received their telecommunications units through a grant in March, 1988. With these units, the sixteen member high school library media centers are able to access the online public access catalog at Longwood College, the Lancaster Library's VTLS (Virginia Tech Library System) database. Library media specialists, teachers, and students can sit in their own library media centers and search the VTLS database by author, title, or subject. If a needed book is found, a request is then made online. The books arrive in the mail several days later. (The only cost to participating school library media centers is the phone call and return

postage for the books!)

The school at which I work, Central Senior High School in Victoria, Virginia, is the only high school in the Lunenburg County Public School System. (Only two counties in the network boast more than one high school: one has two, the other, four.) Southside Virginia is rural with an agriculturally based economy. (In all of Lunenburg County, there are four stoplights!) School systems here face great geographical and financial constraints. Online access, to me, means that I can offer my students, not only the 9000 volumes in our library media center collection, but also the over 700,000 of the Lancaster Library—at no charge to the individual student!

Central Senior High School has been online since March of 1986, and, with each year, our usage has increased. During the 1986-87 school year, we accessed the VTLS database sixteen times; in 1987-88, we accessed forty times; in 1988-89, seventy-three times; and, in 1989-90, we dialed in seventy-eight times and received one hundred-eleven books through interlibrary loan.

As we at Central have used this system, I have seen the benefits grow. Our teachers have been excited because students have access to needed information; our students have been excited because they can get what they need! They watch for interlibrary loan boxes to arrive in the main office, and then they come to the library media center to see if their requested book is in that box! Seeing the benefits that our school has reaped from the online access to an academic catalog made me very curious. A review of literature related to networking and resource

sharing further peaked my curiosity.

In 1978, the Task Force on the Role of the School Library Media Program in Networking pointed out that "the information needs of students, teachers, and others involved in elementary and secondary education frequently go beyond the resources that even the very best school library media programs are able to make available"[2] and that "schools need to provide quick and efficient access for their users to the materials and services of other libraries."[3] In her 1982 report Mary Robinson Sive stated that "the importance of introducing high school students to information sources wider than those of the high school library and to the library community at large is often stressed as an argument in favor of networking."[4]

The theoretical background was there! Next, I searched for studies of school library media centers actively involved in networking to provide greater information access for their students. In a study done by Lucy Anne Wozny concerning online bibliographic searching and use of libraries, she discovered that 98% of the students involved used the school library media center for information.[5] Ms. Wozny asserts that "by recognizing sources of information outside of the high school library media center, librarians can facilitate the use of diverse, current materials that cannot feasibly be included in the high school library media collection."[6] H. Thomas Walker, in his report on networking in Howard County, Maryland, school library media centers, points out that "school library media centers are the locus of much (if not most) student research . . . and are therefore the logical point of

entry for student use of interlibrary lending systems."[7] Kathleen W. Craver, in her report of findings in her recent doctoral dissertation, encourages school library media specialists to consider "joining a multitype network with computerized access to bibliographic materials and modifying their bibliographic instruction units to include use of an online catalog and other types of libraries."[8] This is exactly what we have done in the Southside Virginia Library Network.

I decided, then, to try to determine if information access had made a measurable impact on the network high school library media centers involved, and, if so, in what way or ways. Did access to an online academic catalog increase circulation of the school library media center's own materials? Did it stimulate more research visits to the school library media centers involved? Did teachers give more research assignments or more varied research assignments because of online access? Had the access made a significant difference in teachers' attitudes toward the library media center? Had it made a significant difference in teachers' ratings of the adequacy of the library media centers' collections? Did schools who accessed more often show greater gains than those who accessed less often? These were the questions I wished to explore.

My first step was to construct surveys for the sixteen library media specialists involved and for the English teachers in each of the sixteen schools. (Library media specialists could answer my questions concerning their circulation statistics and the number of classes visiting their library media centers for research. Ideally, I would

like to have surveyed the entire faculty of each of the schools: this, however, was not feasible. To make my study manageable, I had to select one subject area teacher to survey, and since English teachers seem to often be the heaviest media center users, English was my choice.) I wrote first to the principals of the sixteen schools to ask for their cooperation. Surveys with cover letters were then mailed to library media specialists and English teachers in early April, 1990. English teacher surveys went to and were collected and returned by the English department chairpersons in the schools. All sixteen of the library media specialists' surveys were returned, and eleven of the sixteen school English departments responded. In analyzing the surveys which were returned, I learned many things!

Network schools in the twelve county area range in enrollment from 350 to 1521 with the great majority of the schools ranging from 500 to 899. Nine schools serve grades nine through twelve; four schools, grades eight through twelve; two, grades ten through twelve; and, one, grades seven through twelve. Experience of the library media specialists involved in the project ranged from six to thirty-three years.

One of the sixteen schools, one which received its equipment in March of 1988, has not been able to access online due to problems with phone lines and malfunctioning equipment. Of the fifteen remaining, in eleven schools, the school board pays the telecommunications costs! In three schools the library media center pays, and, in one school, the library media center and the school share the expense. No school,

despite financial constraints, charges the students! Seven library media specialists rated their admininstrations' attitude toward VTLS access as excellent, three as very good, three as good, one as fair, and only one as poor. English teachers overall level of awareness of the library media centers' ability to access the VTLS database was 3.4 on a 4.0 scale. Library media specialists are making their teachers aware that this access exists.

Using the library media specialists' surveys, I examined circulation statistics for each member school. My hypothesis had been that schools who accessed more often (six or more times per month) circulated more items in their own library media center than did those schools who accessed less often (less than six times per month). It was my feeling that access to almost unlimited information through interlibrary loan stimulated interest in and use of the school's own materials. Analysis of data (using the t-test of difference between means of two independent groups) showed, however, that there was no significant difference in the number of items circulated for the 1989-90 school year between the two groups (at the .05 significance level). Likewise, there was no significant difference in the number of class research visits to the library media center per month for schools who accessed often (six or more times per month) and for schools who accessed less often (less than six times per month).

Analysis of data from the English teachers' responses (using the same statistical test) showed no significant difference in the number of research assignments teachers made. English teachers in schools who

access more than six times per month do not make significantly more research assignments in number than those in schools who access less than six times per month. Use of online access to an academic catalog, then, did not affect the amount of research. There was a significant difference (at the .05 significance level), however, in the variety of research assignments made. Teachers in schools who access often reported feeling more comfortable making assignments on more varied research topics, because they knew students had access to the materials they would need.

Analysis of data concerning teachers' attitudes toward the library media center before and after access (using the t-test of difference between means for correlated groups) showed that there was a significant improvement in teachers' attitudes with access. English teachers reported a better attitude toward the library media center after access than they had had before access! Similarly, teachers rated the adequacy of the library media center significantly higher with access to the Lancaster Library's collection.

Some of my hypotheses, therefore, were proven to be true. While online access to an academic card catalog and the resulting interlibrary loans did not necessarily stimulate circulation of the school library media centers' own materials, or increase the number of class research visits, or increase the number of assignments English teachers made, it has improved the variety of assignments English teachers can make, the attitude of English teachers toward the library media center, and ratings by English teachers of the adequacy of the

library media centers' collections.

Isn't this what school library media centers are all about? Providing access to all information needed by patrons? Working with teachers to support the curriculum? Building partnerships to better educate students? In describing the role of libraries in our society today, Peggy Sullivan asserts that "the learning society demands libraries that lead to other resources and that establish the connections that people need to utilize them."[9] Comments from various English teachers reflect appreciation for the connection made by the Southside Virginia Library Network: "I am so pleased that we have this capability!" "I feel that our library collection has improved immensely over the past three years. I have definitely enjoyed the supplemented Longwood program for the use of my classes." "I have been extremely pleased with the benefits of this new access. It allows for all sorts of new research and independent study units."

Networking truly has a positive impact on school library media centers and the services which they can offer to their patrons. Some of the schools in the Southside Virginia Library Network have only been online for one school year. It is my belief that, as they are online longer, as students and teachers become more aware, and as usage increases, the benefits will be even greater. Other subject area departments, in addition to English, should be surveyed in the future, because all play an integral part in the library media center's program and its contribution to the school curriculum. Students should be surveyed to determine if greater access to information changes their

attitude toward the library media center.

James W. Liesener, in 1983, in discussing school library media programs stated that "we need to expand and refine the kinds of services we provide to meet the new and expanding learning needs of an information society."[10] The school library media centers in the Southside Virginia Library Network have made a start. We are proud of the access to information which we are able to provide for our students. Technology has made its way, even to rural southside Virginia, and our children are the ones who will reap the benefits of this information access.

Notes

[1]American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Information Power (Chicago: American Library Association, 1988), 5.

[2] Task Force on the Role of the School Library Media Program in the National Program, The role of the school library media program in networking (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 1978), 11, (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 168 599).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Mary Robinson Sive, School library media centers and networking (Syracuse, NY: ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources, 1982), 38, (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 226 764).

[5] Lucy Anne Wozny, "Online bibliographic searching and student use of information: an innovative teaching approach," School Library Media Quarterly 11 (Fall, 1982): 39.

[6] Ibid., 38.

[7] H. Thomas Walker, "Networking and school library media centers: a report of a pilot project of the Howard County (Maryland) Public School System and the Maryland Interlibrary Organization," School Library Media Quarterly 12 (Fall, 1983): 20.

[8] Kathleen Woods Craver, "The influence of the availability of an academic online catalog on the use of academic libraries by college-bound high school seniors," in School Library Media Annual 1989

(Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1989), 129.

[9]Peggy Sullivan, Libraries and the learning society: relationships and linkages among libraries (Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Center for Libraries and Education Improvement, 1984), 21, (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 243 890).

[10] James W. Liesener, Learning at risk: school library media programs in an information world (Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Center for Libraries and Education Improvement, 1983), 12, (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 243 889).